

\cmc\themes
18 June 1991

--Why was this episode a crisis?

K's move was not seen, it turns out--contrary to the impression given to the public--as posing a danger of attack on the US, either in the short run or the long run. Or any new military danger at all, any new danger to the physical security of the US; or to its ability to accomplish any legitimate goals (as distinguished from its goal of invading or intimidating Cuba).

It did pose a political threat to JFK: to the credibility of his predictions, to the image of his character and values and of K's evaluation of him, to the image of the effectiveness of his warnings and threats. This threat would be realized in about a week or earlier, when K's move became publicly known.

The Administration response, on the other hand, did raise short-run risks of major war, possibly even all-out nuclear war: a crisis for the nation, by any standards.

--Why did the Administration create a crisis? How is this behavior (creating a national security crisis in response to perception of a personal or political crisis) to be understood? Who was largely responsible for this choice, and with what motives?

--What is a "crisis"? What characteristics do such episodes typically have in common; what are defining elements? What is the class of such cases, which deserve comparison and analysis in the search for recurrent patterns, for better understanding, prediction, "management" or avoidance?

--Defining elements:

Danger: especially, physical, military, "national security" threats; in the "short run";

Opportunity: to avoid or reduce the danger, in the short time available: but just barely, with difficulty or creativity or luck, not easily or certainly. In some cases, opportunity, at best or with luck, to improve the situation beyond what it was or what could have been achieved before.

--Another characteristic turns out to be so common in episodes that are perceived as crises as to be almost a defining element, though it is rarely listed as such [actually, to the contrary--I note after first writing this--Fen Osler Hampton (Int. Sec. Winter 1984-85) quotes Charles Hermann as including this in the definition of crises, in 1969]:

Surprise: the threatening situation as unexpected, unforeseen, often unimagined; hence, unprepared for, with relevant resources and systems unalert and unmobilized. This factor is typically a major part of the reason for the urgency and intensity of the danger.

--Why do dangerous surprises seem so common in the history of major states, despite their heavy investment in intelligence apparatuses in the interest of avoiding them? Simple incompetence, ignorance, bad theory, ideological distortion, bureaucratic conflict? The complexity and irreducible uncertainty of international behavior (as in weather prediction)? All of these figure to some degree in many political surprises, but my own study of a number of specific cases otherwise described as "crises" reveals another very common element, generally unnoticed as a frequently recurring feature:

The conscious and successful effort of one international state "player" to produce a (generally unpleasant) surprise in another.

And this feature quite typically appears in tandem with another:

The state that has successfully surprised its adversary (or ally) finds itself in turn surprised by the other's response.

Thus, in the Cuban Missile Crisis (and compare the Iraq War), in summary form:

(a) K produced a politically dangerous surprise for JFK.

(b) JFK responded by surprising K just as much, even more dangerously: with a clear threat and danger (to both) of war.

Why did K do (a), given the allegedly "obvious" danger of evoking (b)?

Why did JFK do (b), given its universally obvious dangers?

JFK is frequently and plausibly criticised for over-reacting irresponsibly, recklessly, despite his subsequent success (given the political and personal nature of the threat K posed to him, rather than--as he claimed, and the public accepted at the time--an imminent physical threat to national security or survival).

But was not K acting irresponsibly and recklessly (as JFK claimed) in "provoking" JFK, even though on closer analysis K was acting legally and following US precedent?

Both leaders were contributing to a shared risk, which was real and grave, (and perhaps greater than they realized) even if less than it appeared to many.

Why did they accept/choose/generate such risks? How did they underestimate them? Why were the initial expectations of each falsified? How was it each was so sharply and easily surprised?

What does this experience teach us about the likelihood and dangers of mutual surprise of powerful leaders in the future, and the risk of major or nuclear war?

To understand the Cuban Missile Crisis better, it helps to compare it to a number of other crises which turn out to share common features. To do so helps to understand the emergence, and the significant risks (not all realized) of the Iraq War.

I find a common sub-category of crises in which there are two surprises, at least, at the very core of the conflict: the nature of the initial challenge, and the basic response. Each of two states has attempted, successfully, to surprise the other--despite the fact that each has experienced staffs dedicated to averting their leaders' being so surprised.

It is precisely this pair of surprising challenges that constitutes the crisis, the danger, for one, or often both of the states.

This pattern--that one dangerous, unpleasant, challenging surprise leads to another--seems not to be generally recognized or well-understood. Indeed, that ignorance seems to be why the pattern recurs so frequently. Those who set out to construct a construct a surprise for another national leader or state--despite, often, considerable experience of political affairs and capable intelligence and policymaking staffs--seem generally to underestimate the uncertainty of the response to their move, the likelihood that it will itself be unpleasantly surprising.

When one looks at the motives, on the other side, for that surprising (often aggressive, violent, dangerous) response, one often finds them rooted in the very fact of surprise and in the measures--typically, involving deception--that were necessary to achieve it.

There is a sense in the responding leader not only that he has been endangered--in a way that calls for fast (often unconventional, violent, ordinarily-forbidden) action to protect himself--but that he has been deceived, fooled, doubled-crossed, embarrassed, made a fool of, treated with disrespect ("dissed," in ghetto language) in a way that calls for revenge (even at some risk to other interests) and in any case for violent, bold, risk-taking

behavior aimed at embarrassing or humiliating the other in order to restore his own dignity.

(If such motivation sounds masculine, it is not by chance: the anarchic international system rewards with leadership those men who feel specially sensitive to the demands of a code of machismo).

Described in these terms, the nature of the response might seem understandable enough to be easily predictable; yet it does not seem, in fact, to be commonly predicted. Leaders who are themselves subject to such motivational pressures, and know they are, still frequently (though not always) fail to foresee them in other leaders. There is a common failure of empathy here, among men of power, and their staffs: which leads precisely to dangerous crises.

What I seem to have discovered (a quarter of a century ago) is a common and dangerous failing of state leaders to appreciate certain dangers of deception and secrecy, the full extent of the risks of undertaking to deceive and surprise powerful political actors (which may include their own legislatures or publics). They are blinded in part, as it happens, by their own knowledge, unshared by the "laity," of the frequency with which secrecy and deception can be successfully achieved, long enough to be powerfully effective.

More generally, it is dangerous to set out to humiliate a state leader (usually male, or male-like): who, whether relatively powerful or not, usually controls some destructive capability by virtue of his role, though its use against a more powerful opponent may entail self-destruction. That might seem self-evident: yet the humiliation of an opponent is not infrequently a fundamental goal of policy, either tacitly (as in Cuba II) or with startling explicitness, as in the Iraq War.

This usually arises in pursuit of revenge, i.e., retaliation for one's own humiliation--actual, potential, or attempted--either by the person one is trying to humiliate in turn, or--very commonly, perhaps even generally--by some other person, more powerful or less vulnerable, against whom it is inexpedient to seek revenge and for whom the current target is a scapegoat. (On the latter point, see my notes on rage...).

What seems often to lead to crises is that in the effort to produce a Fait Accompli--where the primary motive is not to humiliate anyone (but, perhaps, to avert one's own humiliating failure)--a leader totally ignores or greatly underrates the effect of the secrecy and deception that are instrumental in pursuing the Fait Accompli in humiliating others who are taken in, fooled, by it. These others may be either the main target of the deception, or in some cases allies or others who are incidentally deceived by it and get out on a limb.

These victims are then subject to feelings of rage and desire for retaliation that are strongly motivational, spurring them to consider quick and violent countermeasures that--given their cost and danger or tabu status--would not normally be considered as appropriate responses to the "objective" challenge, if one abstracted from "the way it was done," the disrespectful, humiliating challenge to (male) personal dignity.

For a political leader, especially a national leader, of course, the implications of such a challenge, such disrespectful behavior, do go beyond its immediate effects on his personal feelings. It threatens his authority, his image and prestige in the eyes of the public, the legislature, his own subordinates and subordinate agencies--i.e., his influence within the executive branch and his own society--and with the nation's allies and the international system: thus, his general influence and effectiveness, and his own ability to stay in power. (See Fen Osler Hampson's comments on this, citing his own work and Richard Neustadt's). If he heads the government, the danger can even, realistically, be said to extend to the power of the nation in the international system.

Insulted leaders and their courtiers in and out of government commonly claim such transcendent implications in justifying their taking such slights seriously and responding violently. These claims tend to be sincere; indeed, (mostly male) power-holders commonly have trouble distinguishing sharply between their own narrow, short-run personal interests and the interests of society at large. But there is also some objective substance to these beliefs, which their own experience of governmental affairs tends to confirm.

An unexpectedly aggressive, dangerous response may be the enraged, violent, humiliation-seeking response of an intended target of a *Fait Accompli*, who has "inadvertently" and unexpectedly been made to feel humiliated and politically endangered by having been successfully deceived by the perpetrator of a *Fait Accompli*.

Failing to foresee this possible effect or to take measures to reduce it, the perpetrator underrates the risks of his course, a factor which encourages him to undertake it, and then in turn to be surprised by the reaction, which constitutes a crisis for himself, encouraging him in turn to escape it by means that produce crises for others...

There is here, evidently, the potential for an escalating chain of crisis, with a cycle of humiliation at its heart, launched often by a failure of empathy: a lack of desire to humiliate but a failure to foresee it, or else to care sufficiently, to imagine empathetically the possible response to it by "putting oneself in the place" of a ("lesser," perhaps despised) opponent.

Thus, concretely: The US-supported regime of Batista in Cuba--like its predecessors and like neo-colonial regimes generally--was experienced widely in Cuba, and above all by aspiring professionals and idealistic nationalists like Castro and Che Guevara (like Ho Chi Minh and Giap in Indochina, or Gandhi in South Africa and India)--as a prolonged experience of humiliation and insult, to their fathers and to themselves.

That is not, in general, the conscious intent of foreign rulers or their local proxies, but it is almost universally the subjective reality of the situation for the local people, and especially for those aspiring to professional careers or to political leadership: one that is little appreciated as a reality or an effective factor by the rulers from beginning to the end of their regime.

The committed, costly, prolonged, dangerous nationalist revolutionary struggle that may ensue is fueled at least as much by this sense of humiliation and desire for personal and national vindication and dignity as by the reality of material exploitation.

(The following points could be put in general terms, like the above paragraph, as applying to Indochina, Nicaragua, China as well: but I will now address Cuba specifically).

But Castro's eventual victory (like that of the Sandinistas, later) was felt by the whole society of the former hegemonic power, and especially its governing elites, as, in turn, a humiliation: both an embarrassing failure and a contraction of its influence, its prestige and authority internationally.

This effect is not exactly unwelcome to the newly triumphant revolutionary regime, but it was not a primary goal, and the dangers it poses were and remain (for a while) underestimated.

It becomes a US goal to rollback Cuba's independence: but also to retaliate for Castro's "impudence," his lack of deference, his defiance.

The Bay of Pigs, which seeks not only to overthrow his regime but to assassinate Castro, ends instead in a dramatic humiliation for the US President personally. Publicly, he accepts responsibility, shows "wisdom," takes the loss philosophically and withdraws from the effort to intervene.

Privately, JFK and his brother are enraged, develop an obsession with vindication, act, in the words of his Secretary of Defense, "hysterical" about Castro. They set in motion the largest covert program in history against him: the head of which states explicitly at the outset and thereafter that only US invasion can

ultimately accomplish the aim of the program, overthrow by October, 1962.

All diplomatic and operational preparations for invasion are made during 1962, openly exercised, with final preparations, in great secrecy, ordered during October.

Both Castro and Khrushchev see all this, having penetrated the covert campaign and witnessing the exercises. In a way totally unimagined by any US officials, even those few who were aware of the existence of the covert programs, or by American analysts for more than a generation afterwards, Khrushchev foresees this impending "loss of Cuba" as an intense prospective humiliation, threatening his and Soviet prestige and influence throughout the Communist and Third World and even his maintenance of power.

What JFK and RFK saw as an attempt to rectify their own humiliation by Castro was seen in the spring of 1962 by Khrushchev as a prospect that would endanger and humiliate him: and he searched, desperately, for a way out. (The "loss of Cuba" was going to cap a whole year of humiliations and frustrations: Kennedy's "calling his bluff" on the missile gap and on his threats on Berlin and East Germany; Kennedy's and McNamara's open discussion of possible nuclear first-strikes in the event of conflict, based on their announced nuclear superiority; and various challenges by China and others, even by Castro in Cuba).

Khrushchev conceives of a way of saving Cuba and simultaneously "turning the tables" against the US in a whole variety of spheres. That this abrupt change in the international status quo, boldly ("impudently", provocatively) asserting, acting on and achieving a status of equality with the US, would amount to a humiliating reversal for the US and specifically for its current leaders, could hardly be missed by the Soviet decision-makers. Indeed, the most experienced among them, such as Mikoyan and Gromyko, had sharp misgivings; yet they did not press them to the limit.

Yet Khrushchev himself, imposing his will without much resistance to it, does seem to have missed entirely what the meaning of that consequence might be, in terms of the vigor and aggressiveness of the US response and its effects on the Soviets and himself.

How could that be? My first answer is to point out that this failure falls within a well-established historical pattern; this is what national leaders in this situation commonly do, this is what to expect from the "hidden history" of international crises. Khrushchev was acting "normally" in his failure to take account, or adequate account, of this effect of his actions. At this point I am much more confident in pointing to the existence of this

phenomenon, and its importance, than I am in attempting to explain it.

One might conjecture, adapting the perspective of depth psychology, a largely unconscious, only partly acknowledged satisfaction in the prospect of his antagonist's "embarrassment" or even humiliation: failing, wishfully, in unconscious pursuit of this "secondary" or unacknowledged aim, to admit into his awareness the full scale of this prospective humiliation, the likelihood of retaliation, and the resulting dangers for his own program and himself.

In this way, it may be, the prospect "I'm going to get him...back" is frequently unaccompanied by conscious awareness or calculation of the likelihood that "he" will be driven to extraordinary lengths to seek, and may find, ways to retaliate in turn.

At any rate, Khrushchev sets out to avert the loss of Cuba (and to improve his own bargaining power in other context of recent and continuing humiliation, including Berlin, US bases on the borders of Russia, and the arms race) by means of a *Fait Accompli*.

Consciously, so far as we know, he does not aim primarily at the humiliation of JFK, but for whatever reasons (perhaps including a semi-conscious desire to embarrass JFK, which leads him wishfully to disregard the likely intensity and the risks of this effect) he disregards the dangers of doing so, taking no special steps to avert this or reduce it.

In the event, the potential humiliation of JFK becomes intense, partly for reasons the Soviets did not fully control. It was not totally foreseeable or totally their fault--certainly they did not desire it--that JFK, believing K's assurances meant to deceive him, made two explicit warnings against what K was in process of doing (too late to influence Khrushchev's move, unless by a truly extraordinary and bureaucratically dangerous reversal).

Nor did they, apparently, foresee or, of course, control, the political challenge raised by the Republicans in the fall election campaign to the ongoing Soviet buildup. It was this that elicited JFK's two warnings in September, which in turn made the ensuing crisis inevitable.

On the other hand, these matters were not totally unforeseeable, either, at least as possibilities. They were results of the Soviets' own actions. The prior large, unprecedented buildup of Soviet assistance to Cuba was not at all unlikely to attract the attention of the Republicans, and even of Democrats in Congress, that it did cause. That this might evoke

an explicit warning from the President was hardly unforeseeable.

Leaders, and for that matter staffs and intelligence agencies, can't foresee everything, realistically. But these are things that might well have been foreseen, and better prepared against, by Soviet officials if the extreme secrecy functionally required by the choice of a strategy of Fait Accompli had not sharply limited Soviet bureaucratic awareness of the project.

Again, this represents a kind of risk--generally unappreciated, unforeseen, by high-level decision-makers--of choosing a secretive, deceptive course, which denies them normal bureaucratic feedback.

On October 16, 1962, JFK actually found himself--to a degree that could not entirely have been anticipated and was surely not intended by Khrushchev in the spring or early summer--made politically vulnerable and potentially embarrassed by Khrushchev's move to a degree that could hardly have been exceeded: thanks to the effects of Khrushchev's earlier, publicly known preparations, the response to them of the opposing party just prior to an election, and to his own "gullible" reassurances in response to this domestic challenge.

The circumstances, and the intense vulnerability, were almost exactly matched by George Bush's situation on August 2, 1990, when his quasi-ally Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

In both cases, the American President set out secretly on a course of action intended not only to avert or reverse the humiliating policy failure but to humiliate his opponent. In JFK's case, there was the irony that the President who was led to aim at this was one who earlier, later and even during the crisis was almost uniquely expressive of the importance of foregoing, in general, any intent to humiliate an opponent, because of the dangers of doing so.

One might note that Bush, despite spectacular success in some respects, has so far failed in this explicit objective. It seems no more easy to drive Saddam Hussein from political life by humiliating him than to do this to Richard Nixon.

Risk-taking in the Cuban Missile Crisis

In Cuba, the hawks and doves divided on two dimensions: the level of risk they found acceptable; the level of actual risk they perceived.

Doves tended to find only very low risks acceptable, and at the same time to see the actual risks as extremely high. Hawks found the actual risks very low, while they would have accepted levels of risk much higher than the doves (though not necessarily so high as many outside critics, or even inside doves, thought the actual risks to be).

It is easier to make distinctions among various states of mind in the policy-makers in terms of numbers--subjective probabilities, or betting odds--than by purely verbal expressions. [see estimates by JFK, Nitze, McGeorge Bundy...]

The problem that I see after a quarter-century's reflection on the Cuban Missile Crisis and subsequent history is not that either American or Soviet leaders are willing--in the kinds of circumstances that have actually so far been experienced, including crises and limited wars--to take actions that they see as nearly certain to lead to all-out war, nuclear or non-nuclear, or as having a high chance of doing so: 70, 80, 90% Nor that they have been or will be likely to misperceive a situation that is "actually" that risky for one that is much less so.

What I find in my studies is that in actual, recurrent circumstances leaders on both sides have secretly been willing to "accept" risks of major war, including nuclear war, that they themselves have estimated at levels that are low to moderate in numerical terms but are disturbingly high in view of the stakes.

Thus, Paul Nitze told Harry Rowen, immediately after the crisis, that he had put the chance of nuclear war at "one in ten"--a 10% probability--if the US had struck the missiles on Cuba: a course he avored if the Soviets did not back down. I was shocked by that revelation at the time, even though I was a strong cold warrior, who favored no concessions to the Soviets during the crisis because I thought it highly likely that Khrushchev would back down without them. (Even though he did so, I now feel that I was considerably overconfident of this at the time; I think his backdown reflected in good part our "luck" and unforeseeable circumstance).

Nitze claimed that he was "low man" on the Executive Committee (ExComm) in this estimate. Some of his colleagues, of course, opposed this course of action, no doubt in part for this reason. But others, like Nitze, favored it. Evidently they found a risk of nuclear war even higher than 10% "acceptable" in some easily-

foreseeable circumstances. I was startled, and appalled, to learn that I was working with officials who held such values.

At the same time, I believed that the actual risk of nuclear war, even if the President ordered an attack on Cuba (which I did not favor), was very much lower than this, because of the extreme nuclear superiority of the US and conventional superiority in the Caribbean. (Again, I think I underestimated this risk; Nitze may have been about right).

[Summary of further points: I believe McNamara and JFK were, if anything, even less willing to attack Cuba than I was, once the missiles had been deployed. I think that JFK was determined to settle the conflict by a trade rather than attack Cuba, so that he saw the risks of a nuclear war as numerically low, say 1-2% (as McGeorge Bundy has estimated in retrospect): essentially the risk that events would get out of his control, with unauthorized actions occurring or pressures building up to a level he could not resist.

I further think he probably underestimated this latter risk, including the possibility of uncontrolled actions by others and his ability to predict or control his own behavior under increased pressure: say a better estimate might have been 2-4% or even 5-10%. But even if a leaders like JFK could have been helped to perceive these more realistic, somewhat higher estimates of risk, I believe that he would nevertheless have "accepted" them, no doubt "reluctantly."

All of these estimates represent a level of risk of nuclear war--or even of major non-nuclear war--that is frighteningly, unjustifiably, unconscionably high for a President to have accepted under the actual circumstances as JFK knew them to be: in preference to alternative courses of which he was aware: even in light of his plausible belief that some of those alternatives might have risked his own impeachment.

The same is true of the risks that Khrushchev accepted at the time: even if he, too, was determined from the beginning to avert still higher risks by conceding if necessary (as he ultimately did).

This judgment is not modified by my belief that any of the other presidents we have had in the last 45 years (except possibly Carter) would probably have taken actions in the same circumstances that were at least as risky, in some cases much more so. The same holds for other Soviet leaders (except Gorbachev, after his first year or so).

It is what I see as the willingness of "normal" American and Soviet leaders (and no doubt others) to take 1-10% risks of nuclear war in comparatively trivial and frequently encountered circumstances--to avert or redress personal humiliations or

failures of policy--that defines for me a terrible existential challenge to the survival of humanity and other forms of life. (Leadership attitudes toward long-run environmental perils are, of course, quite comparably ominous).

The Option of Trading the Turkish Missiles

The options JFK confronted are universally misdescribed; the set described usually does not include the one that I believe he privately chose; nor the one that he improvised later, which actually won (in a way foreseen by no one). Nor does any analyst, in my opinion, correctly describe JFK's actual choices (since none even includes these actual courses among the options that were or might have been considered).

Nor has anyone commented on the fact that the actual victorious outcome (as the civilians saw it, not the military) was one--quick withdrawal of Soviet missiles without either US air or ground attack, a Soviet countermove elsewhere, or a public trade of bases--whose very possibility was foreseen by no one--hawk, dove, or intelligence analyst--either as the result of the course actually followed (which was earlier recommended--or even conceived--by no one) or as the result of any other course.

(Compare the outcome of the Iraq War: total collapse and withdrawal of the Iraqi Army in Kuwait at the cost of 137 US combat deaths. Likewise, in both cases, the victory was so quick, total and "cheap" as to raise a question whether it, or a lesser but highly adequate success, required anything like the actual effort expended.)

One of the distortions in these analyses of the CMC is the universal belief that JFK (and most of the ExComm) had ruled out a public trade of bases at the outset and consistently, unequivocally and summarily thereafter: a belief reflecting all the official accounts for two decades after the crisis, during which no official participant contradicted it, although, it turns out, every one of them knew it to be untrue.

Evidence that JFK actually expected and intended to accept a public trade, newly available, was known to very few participants at the time; but all of the ExComm must have known that JFK held open this eventual outcome at the NSC meeting of October 20 (before the blockade) and actually argued strongly for it on the crucial day of October 27 (while others, including McNamara, had described as the likely and acceptable outcome on other days throughout the crisis).

In light of these facts widely known to the participants, certain of JFK's choices--in particular, the choice of blockade over either an airstrike or an ultimatum, and the October 27 choice of the "Trollope Ploy," offering to accept the Fomin proposal while ignoring the most recent message from Khrushchev which proposed a trade--can best be understood as holding open (while postponing) the option of an eventual public trade.

(Fen Osler Hampson misses this point in his critique of the first choice, International Security, Winter 1984-85; MR Beschloss misses it in his discussion of the latter choice, missing the essence of the "Trollope Ploy" in identifying it with McGeorge Bundy's proposal rather than RFK's). Indeed, no analyst has made this observation: since none has put together all the evidence now available on JFK's actual attitude to the prospect of a trade.

What JFK did reject was "doing nothing" or (as Stevenson preferred--and probably others) offering a public trade before or instead of any violent, risky action at all, such as a blockade. The latter was "needed"--as I believe JFK saw it--both for domestic reasons and to improve the terms of an eventual trade and its results both internationally and domestically.

(There is a strong analogy to the "need" for the Christmas bombing of 1972, in Nixon's eyes, compared to accepting HAK's "peace is at hand" deal in October without the bombing.)

There is now a good deal of evidence available to support the inference or conjecture--though no one else has made it--that almost from the beginning JFK aimed at and foresaw an outcome in which the Soviet missiles would be withdrawn from Cuba as part of a bilateral or multilateral deal.

He hoped, I believe, that the prior pressures of the blockade and the threat of US attack on Cuba would limit the necessary public US concessions to the missiles in Turkey and perhaps Italy. (He did not expect the offer of a "private," unacknowledged trade of the Turkish missiles, thought of and tried at the last minute, would be adequate, even with a no-invasion pledge).

Since, I conjecture, he was prepared to make the public trade--and almost surely to go even further if necessary--rather than to attack Cuba once the missiles had been installed, his actual, secret strategy, as I now see it, was very much less risky than the strategy that virtually all of the public and most officials (including me) thought at the time--and ever since--that he was following.

Yet his actual strategy--if I am right--was not without risk. It involved postponing the resolution of the conflict by a deal involving mutual concessions, meanwhile taking highly aggressive and provocative actions including blockade of Soviet warships and submarines and low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba, along with a dangerous level of nuclear alert. The situation could have exploded in a number of ways, escaping from leaders' control despite their mutual, intense reluctance to see a major war develop.

This residual danger was nowhere near the range of risk that "dove" critics saw in the strategy they (and most hawks) believed

he was following. Unlike many hawks, they did not expect Khrushchev to back down without US concessions--which they did not expect JFK to offer--so they saw the chance of war as extremely high.

With almost thirty years' more experience than I had then, I see their estimate of Khrushchev's likely behavior as having been more realistic than mine was at the time (even though he did back down: one factor being that the no-invasion pledge, even without being unequivocal or thoroughly reliable, had more significance to him than I could appreciate at the time).

(That generation's worth of experience led me, during the six-month buildup to the Iraq War, to predict that neither Bush nor Saddam Hussein was likely to back down to avert war, though each of them should do so: and those predictions, unhappily, were not wrong).

JFK's secret willingness--like Khrushchev's--ultimately to make major concessions in order to avoid war was, I conclude, quite different from that of George Bush or Saddam Hussein--or Lyndon Johnson or Ho Chi Minh--and for that I give him much credit.

His policy was very much less dangerous than it reasonably appeared to many, then and since; less dangerous and less inappropriate than I myself had judged it to be over much of the intervening period; and less dangerous than the strategies that most other US postwar presidents would probably have chosen in his place. (These judgements do not draw at all on the fact that it succeeded: indeed, in a way and to a degree that he had never imagined).

Yet his actual policy, as I now see it, still appears to me, to have been frighteningly dangerous. Unconscionably so: not by the standards of contemporary leaders or other postwar American presidents but in light of the requirements of human welfare, acceptable morality, and survival.

June 21:

Points covered in the January 2, 1990 Grant Proposal for a Writing Project:

1. How the crisis ended: the risk of war = risk of loss of control (in the context of JFK's ultimatum/bluff).
2. The President's role in deciding at the outset--contrary to the initial (as-yet-unreported) reactions of many of his top aides--that "the missiles must go" and that immediate negotiations were to be ruled out, in favor of some military "action" presented as a fait accompli and unaccompanied initially by any negotiating overtures.
3. Khrushchev's deployment as constituting a deterrent first-use threat = NATO's deterrent first-use threat in Europe: in both cases, essentially a threat of loss of high-level control (irresponsibly reckless in both cases, in that it might have failed to deter, as the Cuban case shows).
4. (Mentioned, not discussed): JFK's willingness to trade the Turkish missiles or go further, from the beginning.

What is not discussed in that proposal: among other things,

5. Lack of effect on strategic issues, in eyes of highest officials: either of effect on SU first-strike capability (of critical nature) or on US first-strike capability: hence, on second-strike capability of either.

However, apparent (perhaps, political) effect on both SU first-strike capability and likelihood (say, in response to US first-use in Europe) and on US first-strike capability (say, in response to SU second-use in Europe); and a definite, real narrowing of the margin of US strategic superiority (especially if 100 or more missiles were deployed); and a definite demonstration of Soviet boldness, a change both in Soviet behavior and a change, toward equality, in superpower behavior and "rules," plausibly indicating a shift in the balance (both before and after the deployment) that made US first-use look less credible (or acceptable) over Berlin.

Note that concern for the implications for Berlin of "letting Khrushchev get away with this" or trading away the missiles: a) was real, sincere, among officials, including the President (and myself) at the time; b) was plausible, then and now; c) was based on a good deal of verbal evidence from the Soviets; d) was probably justified, despite the current Soviet denials of any linkage (they take no account of (c)); e) was the most serious strategic or foreign policy threat posed by the deployment. It is by far the

best counter to the claim that only domestic political problems were raised (as McNamara said on the 16th).

However, the fact that--contrary to virtually all expectations on the ExCom--no pressures were made by the Soviets against Berlin either in response to the blockade or in readiness for invasion of Cuba does give some support to Soviets' denials of linkage: unless they were simply too scared under the unexpected circumstances of the US threats. From the latter point of view, JFK's tough stance may have protected Berlin from pressures, rather than provoking a Berlin blockade (as many had feared). (Just as the Soviet deployment may actually have prevented an invasion, rather than--as it appeared, and as might have eventuated during the crisis--provoking it).

The undeniable military-political effect of the deployment, if the missiles had become fully operational, would have been greatly to reduce the credibility of US threats of invasion of Cuba and the real likelihood of such an invasion or air attack. It would have slammed shut the Open Door to US invasion upon which US policy insisted.

5. Evidence for the willingness of the President--and others--from the outset to trade Turkish missiles, contrary to all official testimony for close to twenty-five years. This was not just an unforeseen response to the actual experience of the crisis after the blockade began--as Blight drew from the Rusk revelation of the "Cordier gambit" of October 27, but implicit in the President's discussion from at last the 19th (and for McNamara and others, earlier).

6. What was the President's secret strategy, and its objectives? Did it evolve, or was it fairly consistent from near the outset? What did the President privately expect/plan to do if (as he expected) Khrushchev failed to remove the missiles by October 28-29, or anytime later in the absence of US concessions in negotiations?

7. Specifically, in light of (5), why did the President decide to postpone any negotiation of a trade until after the blockade started, meanwhile bluffing: a) on unwillingness to trade ever; b) on his willingness to go to war, including nuclear war; c) demonstrating (b) in a variety of ways, including the blockade and reconnaissance and preparations for invasion (without committing himself formally to reject a trade)? (Given (c), all these measures involved significant risk of losing control, at the time or later, during the whole period from October 22 to October 28).

8. Why did the President decide to go this route (if he did)?

9. Why did a two-sided crisis occur? Why did Khrushchev do what he did (deployment, secretly and with deception instead of with

public announcement of intention and movements); what made him think that the chance of getting away with it was acceptable? Why did JFK respond as in (8) (i.e., less riskily than the public and most official understanding of his strategy indicated, but still posing and accepting significant risk, not merely the appearance of risk and crisis)?

10. What has the been the function, and the effect on historical understanding and public and governmental behavior, of nearly 30 years of continued secrecy and lies on both sides (especially, since 1987, on the US side)?

11. How the occurrence of the crisis--commencing when each superpower presented the other with a devastating surprise, a massive failure for each of the two largest intelligence and policymaking apparatuses in the world--fit into a crisis-pattern I discerned in my 1964 studies: The Theory of the Faits Malaccompli.

12. The Story: What (I now think) was really planned, intended, or carried out on each side in the 1962.

13. The long-run confrontation over Cuba and Berlin as a Cycle/Sequence of Humiliations and vengeful attempted humiliations, along with efforts to avert or redress humiliation; and a sequence of desperate risk-taking gambles by leaders.

14. The phenomenon of lack of empathy among leaders, or sufficient concern, for the intensity of and likelihood of violent responses to the humiliating impact of their policies on others: underlying their proclivity for providing dangerous surprises for each other. This despite the basis for empathy in the form of shared, esoteric experience of power and policymaking and political rivalry. There is a special irony that JFK fit into this pattern, given his unusual conscious awareness of the dangers of provoking or humiliating an opponent, and his particular concern to avoid the course of misjudgment, misunderstanding, dangerous bullying and loss of control that preceded World War I (as described in The Guns of August, which he had urged his top Cabinet members to read in 1961).